SŪRAH 54

Al-Qamar
(The Moon)

Prologue

From start to finish, this *sūrah* represents an awesome onslaught against those who deny the warnings, but gives at the same time confident reassurance to the believers. It is divided into a series of scenes, each showing a different type of suffering inflicted on a community of unbelievers who denied God's messages. Each culminates with a violent shaking of the human heart, as it asks: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings!*" It then lets go, saying: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*"

The themes tackled in this *sūrah* are discussed in many *sūrahs* of Makkan revelation. It begins with a scene from the Day of Judgement and ends with a similar scene. In between, the *sūrah* dwells briefly on the fates of Noah's people, the ʿĀd, Thamūd, Lot's people and Pharaoh and his followers. All these are tackled in different ways in other *sūrahs*. Yet all these issues are presented here in a special way, making them appear totally new. Here we see each episode as violent, tempestuous, spreading fear, engendering collapse and a sweeping destruction.

The *sūrah*'s main characteristic is that each scene paints a fast episode of punishment presented to those who deny the divine faith. They feel that they personally are involved in it, witnessing the punishment and enduring its pain. When one scene is over and listeners begin to breathe

again, a new and more awesome scene of punishment is presented to them. When seven such episodes in this suffocating and fearful atmosphere are completed, the last image is presented, providing us with a totally different aura, delivering pleasant shades of security, serenity and reassurance. It shows us the righteous and their destiny: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) How different is this from the condition of the unbelievers who are also told of their fate: "*On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verse 48)

Al-Qamar (The Moon)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. (1)

اقْتَرَبَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَانشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ ﴿١﴾

Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' (2)

وَإِن يَرَوْا آيَةً يُعْرِضُوا وَيَقُولُوا سِحْرٌ مُّسْتَمِرٌّ ﴿٢﴾

They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. (3)

وَكَذَّبُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ ۚ وَكُلُّ أَمْرٍ مُّسْتَقِرٌّ ﴿٣﴾

There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], (4)

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُم مِّنَ الْأَنبَاءِ مَا فِيهِ مُزْدَجَرٌ ﴿٤﴾

far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. (5)

حِكْمَةٌ بَالِغَةٌ ۖ فَمَا تُغْنِ النُّذُرُ ﴿٥﴾

So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, (6)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ ۘ يَوْمَ يَدْعُ الدَّاعِ إِلَىٰ شَيْءٍ نُّكُرٍ ﴿٦﴾

with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts (7)

خُشَّعًا أَبْصَارُهُمْ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ كَأَنَّهُمْ جَرَادٌ مُّنتَشِرٌ ﴿٧﴾

rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (8)

مُّهْطِعِينَ إِلَى الدَّاعِ ۖ يَقُولُ الْكَافِرُونَ هَٰذَا يَوْمٌ عَسِرٌ ﴿٨﴾

Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. (9)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ فَكَذَّبُوا عَبْدَنَا وَقَالُوا مَجْنُونٌ وَازْدُجِرَ ﴿٩﴾

Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' (10)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَغْلُوبٌ فَانتَصِرْ ﴿١٠﴾

So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, (11)

فَفَتَحْنَا أَبْوَابَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَاءٍ مُّنْهَمِرٍ ﴿١١﴾

and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. (12)

وَفَجَّرْنَا الْأَرْضَ عُيُونًا فَالْتَقَى الْمَاءُ عَلَىٰ أَمْرٍ قَدْ قُدِرَ ﴿١٢﴾

We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails (13)

وَحَمَلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ ذَاتِ أَلْوَاحٍ وَدُسُرٍ ﴿١٣﴾

which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. (14)

تَجْرِي بِأَعْيُنِنَا جَزَاءً لِّمَن كَانَ كُفِرَ ﴿١٤﴾

We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? (15)

وَلَقَد تَّرَكْنَاهَا آيَةً فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٥﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (16)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٦﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (17)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٧﴾

The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (18)

كَذَّبَتْ عَادٌ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٨﴾

We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: (19)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِى يَوْمِ نَحْسٍ مُّسْتَمِرٍّ ﴿١٩﴾

it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. (20)

تَنزِعُ ٱلنَّاسَ كَأَنَّهُمْ أَعْجَازُ نَخْلٍ مُّنقَعِرٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (21)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٢١﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (22)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. (23)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ﴿٢٣﴾

They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. (24)

فَقَالُوٓا۟ أَبَشَرًا مِّنَّا وَٰحِدًا نَّتَّبِعُهُۥٓ إِنَّآ إِذًا لَّفِى ضَلَٰلٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

أَءُلْقِيَ ٱلذِّكْرُ عَلَيْهِ مِنۢ بَيْنِنَا بَلْ هُوَ كَذَّابٌ أَشِرٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' (25)

سَيَعْلَمُونَ غَدًا مَّنِ ٱلْكَذَّابُ ٱلْأَشِرُ ﴿٢٦﴾

Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. (26)

إِنَّا مُرْسِلُوا۟ ٱلنَّاقَةِ فِتْنَةً لَّهُمْ فَٱرْتَقِبْهُمْ وَٱصْطَبِرْ ﴿٢٧﴾

We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. (27)

وَنَبِّئْهُمْ أَنَّ ٱلْمَآءَ قِسْمَةٌۢ بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ كُلُّ شِرْبٍ مُّحْتَضَرٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. (28)

فَنَادَوْا۟ صَاحِبَهُمْ فَتَعَاطَىٰ فَعَقَرَ ﴿٢٩﴾

They called their friend, who took something and slew her. (29)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٣٠﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (30)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ صَيْحَةً وَٰحِدَةً فَكَانُوا۟ كَهَشِيمِ ٱلْمُحْتَظِرِ ﴿٣١﴾

We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. (31)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (32)

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍۭ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ﴿٣٣﴾

Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. (33)

We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, (34)

إِنَّآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ حَاصِبًا إِلَّآ ءَالَ لُوطٖۖ نَّجَّيۡنَٰهُم بِسَحَرٖ ٣٤

as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. (35)

نِّعۡمَةٗ مِّنۡ عِندِنَاۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي مَن شَكَرَ ٣٥

He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. (36)

وَلَقَدۡ أَنذَرَهُم بَطۡشَتَنَا فَتَمَارَوۡاْ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ٣٦

They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (37)

وَلَقَدۡ رَٰوَدُوهُ عَن ضَيۡفِهِۦ فَطَمَسۡنَآ أَعۡيُنَهُمۡ فَذُوقُواْ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ٣٧

At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. (38)

وَلَقَدۡ صَبَّحَهُم بُكۡرَةً عَذَابٞ مُّسۡتَقِرّٞ ٣٨

'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (39)

فَذُوقُواْ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ٣٩

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (40)

وَلَقَدۡ يَسَّرۡنَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَ لِلذِّكۡرِ فَهَلۡ مِن مُّدَّكِرٖ ٤٠

Pharaoh's people also received warnings. (41)

وَلَقَدۡ جَآءَ ءَالَ فِرۡعَوۡنَ ٱلنُّذُرُ ٤١

كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا كُلِّهَا فَأَخَذْنَـٰهُمْ أَخْذَ عَزِيزٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task. (42)

أَكُفَّارُكُمْ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكُمْ أَمْ لَكُمْ بَرَآءَةٌ فِى ٱلزُّبُرِ ﴿٤٣﴾

Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? (43)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ نَحْنُ جَمِيعٌ مُّنتَصِرٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? (44)

سَيُهْزَمُ ٱلْجَمْعُ وَيُوَلُّونَ ٱلدُّبُرَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. (45)

بَلِ ٱلسَّاعَةُ مَوْعِدُهُمْ وَٱلسَّاعَةُ أَدْهَىٰ وَأَمَرُّ ﴿٤٦﴾

But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. (46)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ فِى ضَلَـٰلٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

The evildoers are indeed in error and in raging flames of fire. (47)

يَوْمَ يُسْحَبُونَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ ذُوقُوا۟ مَسَّ سَقَرَ ﴿٤٨﴾

On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' (48)

إِنَّا كُلَّ شَىْءٍ خَلَقْنَـٰهُ بِقَدَرٍ ﴿٤٩﴾

We have created everything in due measure. (49)

وَمَآ أَمْرُنَآ إِلَّا وَٰحِدَةٌ كَلَمْحٍۭ بِٱلْبَصَرِ ﴿٥٠﴾

Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. (50)

We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? (51)	وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَآ أَشْيَاعَكُمْ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٥١﴾
Everything they do is noted in their records. (52)	وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ فَعَلُوهُ فِي الزُّبُرِ ﴿٥٢﴾
Every single thing, small or great, is recorded. (53)	وَكُلُّ صَغِيرٍ وَكَبِيرٍ مُّسْتَطَرٌ ﴿٥٣﴾
The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, (54)	إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَهَرٍ ﴿٥٤﴾
in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign. (55)	فِي مَقْعَدِ صِدْقٍ عِندَ مَلِيكٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٥٥﴾

The Splitting of the Moon

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (Verses 1–8)

This is a highly inspiring opening, speaking of a momentous event in the wide universe that heralds an immeasurably greater event: "*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*" (Verse 1) What a piece

of news! They saw the first event with their own eyes, and they can only anticipate the greater one. The splitting of the moon, witnessed by the Arabs, is confirmed in numerous reports; all agree that this took place, though they differ in their general and detailed descriptions of how it occurred. Here, we will give a few of these reports:

Anas ibn Mālik reports: "The people of Makkah asked the Prophet to show them a miracle, and the moon was split in Makkah twice. He read: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*' [Related by Mālik.] The same report by Anas is given in another version stating the people's request for a miracle, then saying: "He showed them the moon split in two halves, and they could see Mount Ḥirā' in between." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Jubayr ibn Muṭ'im reports: "The moon was split during the Prophet's lifetime and it was seen in two halves, one over each mountain. People said: 'Muḥammad has cast a magic spell on us.' Then they said: 'If he could cast a spell on us, he cannot do that to all people.'" [Related by Aḥmad, and also by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bayhaqī with different chains of transmission.]

Ibn 'Abbās is quoted by various transmitters as having said: "The moon was once split during the Prophet's lifetime." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other versions add: "This took place before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. They could see its two halves." Yet another version related by al-Ṭabaranī with a different chain of transmitters quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "The moon was eclipsed during the Prophet's time. The unbelievers said, 'A spell is cast on the moon'. A Qur'ānic revelation was bestowed from on high stating: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder*'.

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar said: "The moon was split in two halves during the Prophet's time in Makkah, with one half seen at the near side of the mountain and the other at the far side. The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Be my witness.'" [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports: "During the Prophet's time, the moon was split in two and people could see it. The Prophet said: 'Look at it and be witnesses.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Bukhārī adds another version of this report with a different chain of transmitters quoting Ibn Mas'ūd: "When the moon was split, the Quraysh said: 'This

is a magic spell cast by Ibn Abī Kabshah [a derogatory nickname they gave to the Prophet]. Wait until some travellers arrive, for Muḥammad cannot cast his spell on all people.' When travellers came they confirmed the splitting of the moon."

The Qur'ān clearly stated this event to the unbelievers at the time, but there is no report to suggest that they ever denied it. It must, then, have happened in a way that makes denial practically impossible. Had there been a way to deny it, they would have done so, if only for the sake of meaningless argument. All that has been reported of their reactions are their statements that the Prophet had cast a magic spell on them. Yet they too directly witnessed the event and so knew for themselves that this was no magic. Had the Prophet been able to cast a spell on them, he could not have done the same to the travellers in the desert. Such travellers, let us recall, confirmed that they had witnessed this extraordinary event.

A Miracle in Support?

We need to add here a word about the report that the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle and in response the moon was split in two showing them what they had asked for. This report is in conflict with a clear Qur'ānic statement that stipulates that the Prophet was not supported by any miracle of the type given to earlier messengers. The reason is explained in the following verse: "*Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false.*" (17: 59) This statement makes clear that, in His infinite wisdom, God decided not to show unbelievers miraculous signs in support of His message, because earlier communities had rejected them as false.

On every occasion the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle, his reply was that this was outside his remit: he was no more than a human messenger. He always referred them to the Qur'ān, declaring that it was the only sign to confirm the veracity of his message. "*Say, 'If all mankind and the* jinn *were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.' Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept*

anything other than unbelief. They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date-palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.'" (17: 88–93)

Therefore, the claim that this splitting of the moon was in response to the unbelievers' demand for a miracle is contrary to clear Qur'ānic texts. It is also contrary to the strategy adopted by this final divine message in addressing the human mind only by the Qur'ān and its miraculous nature. It is the Qur'ān that directs people's minds to reflect on the signs available in the universe and in their own constitutions, as well as in historical events. The actual miracles that were given to the Prophet and confirmed by many authentic reports were merely aspects of God's grace which He extended to His Messenger. They did not constitute proofs of His message.

We, therefore, confirm that the splitting of the moon was indeed a reality, as stated in the Qur'ān and in many authentic reports indicating its place, time and appearance. We do not, however, endorse the causes stated in some of these reports, but we will highlight the combination of the Qur'ānic confirmation of its happening with the reference to the Last Hour drawing near. This is intended to awaken the human mind so that it responds to the divine message.

The splitting of the moon, then, was a clear sign to which the Qur'ān draws people's attention, just like it draws attention to other signs available in the universe around us. It wonders at the unbeliever's attitude to all these signs, including the splitting of the moon.

Physical miracles may appear amazing to the human mind prior to its maturity; that is prior to its ability to contemplate the permanent signs already available in the universe and being influenced by what these signs clearly prove. All the physical miracles that messengers were given before mankind had attained maturity were not as great as others already available in the world around us. Yet these do not excite man's instinctive reactions like those unfamiliar miracles.

Even if we consider the splitting of the moon on this occasion to be a physical miracle, the fact remains that the moon itself is a greater miracle. Its size, position, shape, nature, ever-changing stages, cycle, bearing on life on earth and how it stays in space without support make the moon a great miracle that people can see with their eyes and contemplate with their minds. It testifies to man's heart and mind as a witness to God's creation. It cannot be denied except by one who is a stubborn unbeliever.

The Qur'ān puts the human mind face to face with the universe and what it contains of God's signs. This is far better than providing an unfamiliar sign lasting only for a brief period and seen by only one generation of people in one particular place. The entire universe then is a great sign; here everything small or large is a sign of God's immeasurable ability. The human mind is invited at every moment to look at these permanent signs and to listen to their testimony, which is always lucid and decisive. It is also invited to enjoy all the marvellous aspects of creation, which combine beauty with perfection and excite a feeling of amazement to strengthen conviction. The present *sūrah* opens with a reference to the fact that the Last Hour is drawing near and to the splitting of the moon. It thus delivers a shock to the human mind, which then anticipates the Last Hour that is soon to happen, made all the more apparent by virtue of the great event that has just taken place. It can now stretch imagination to the events that will accompany the Last Hour.

How close is the Last Hour? The Prophet is quoted as saying: "I have been given my message as close to the Last Hour as these two", pointing with his index and middle finger. [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Reactions to Great Signs

Yet close as the dreaded Hour is, and despite the exciting and great event they have just witnessed and the numerous signs around them, the unbelievers continued to stubbornly reject the message, insisting on their erring ways. Not only did they ignore the warnings, they also did not properly reflect on the pointers to the great truth that should have

brought them to faith: "*Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verses 2–5)

They indeed turned away and when they saw the moon split in two, they said that it was a magical spell cast over their eyes. They said the same thing about the Qur'ān, which is itself a great sign. They alleged that it too was another act of sorcery. Since signs to the truth are given all the time, they argue that such sorcery is continuous and never ending. They turn away from every sign, unwilling to reflect on their nature or understand their message. Prompted by arbitrary feelings that lack all evidence, they deny these signs and what messages they deliver, refusing to reflect on the fundamental truth confirmed by everything around them in the universe.

"*Yet everything is ultimately settled.*" (Verse 3) Everything in the universe is in its proper place, well settled, and not subject to any upheaval. The whole universe is well fixed, unaffected by fleeting desires, changing whims or blind coincidences. Everything occurs at its appropriate time, in its right place. This is clearly seen in everything around them: universal cycles, the laws of life, the stages of growth of plants and animals, the apparent characteristics of all materials, and indeed in the physiology of people's own bodies and organs which they cannot control. With everything around them settled in perfect order, as they clearly see, they are the only ones who act on the promptings of transitory whims and desires.

"*There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance].*" (Verse 4) They received the truth about the universal signs highlighted in the Qur'ān, news of what happened to earlier communities when they denied God's messages, news of the life to come vividly depicted in the Qur'ān. All these should have been enough to stop anyone who wants to indulge in excess. Such news and tidings carried enough wisdom to direct people's minds to God's elaborate and wise planning. Twisted minds, however, do not open to acknowledge great signs, benefit by news or heed warnings: "*far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verse 5) It is only a mind that is ready

to receive faith that benefits by all this and enjoys the great blessings of faith.

Having given a full picture of their stubborn rejection, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to turn away from them, leaving them to face their fate on the day to the approach of which they pay little heed, despite seeing a sign like the splitting of the moon heralding it: "*So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.'* (Verses 6–8) These verses paint a scene of that day which is fierce and grim, consistent with the ambience of the *sūrah*. They also warn of the closeness of the Last Hour, highlighted by the splitting of the moon in two. All of this fits perfectly with the rhythm maintained throughout the *sūrah*.

It is a scene full of quick movement, yet it is also prominent, with clear lines and features: multitudes of people are rising from their graves, like swarming locusts, yet their eyes are downcast, humble, fearful. They rush towards the one who calls them forward, but they do not know what they are called to, and they cannot be reassured. As this gathering continues to take place, and amidst all this humility, the unbelievers say in a tone of distress that reflects their dawning awareness of the hardship ahead of them: "*Hard indeed is this day.*" (Verse 8)

Such, then, is the day which draws near; still they continue to deny it. Therefore, the Prophet is to turn away from them when that day arrives. He is to leave them to face their miserable destiny.

Far Back in History

After this powerful opening, the *sūrah* begins to portray scenes of the punishment meted out to earlier communities of unbelievers, who traversed the same way as the Arabs who denied the Prophet Muḥammad's message:

> *Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' So We opened the*

> *gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 9–17)

"*Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth.*" (Verse 9) They rejected the divine message and the signs given to them. "*They rejected Our servant,*" Noah, and said, "*He is mad!*" just like the Quraysh unjustly said of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), threatening to stone him, but still ridiculing him and demanding that he desist. "*And he was harshly rebuffed.*" (Verse 9) They though should have been the ones who took heed and desisted.

Having suffered all this rejection, Noah referred to his Lord who had entrusted him with His message requiring him to deliver it to his people. He submitted his report on how things stood between him and his people and the results of his efforts. He wanted the decision to be made by God after he himself had exerted every effort: "*Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!'*" (Verse 10) I have done my best and I am now powerless. I can do no more. You are the One to grant help and support to Your message. All power belongs to You and the decision is Yours.

Hardly is the word uttered and the matter handed over to the Almighty when God's mighty hand points to the great universe and its crushing wheel starts to roll: "*So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose.*" (Verses 11–12) This is a huge and overwhelming universal action described in well-chosen words and phrases. It begins by attributing the action directly to God: "*We opened*", so that we see that it is the hand of the Almighty that opened "*the gates of heaven,*" in the plural, "*with water pouring down in torrents,*" one wave after another. By the same token and movement, We "*caused the earth to burst forth with springs*". We see through the words water bursting forth everywhere, as though the whole earth has become an

immense and gushing spring. Thus the water pouring from the skies and the water gushing from the earth "*met for a preordained purpose*". These waters met in implementation of what God had preordained, obeying His divine command and bringing it to fulfilment.

When it was a huge flood, covering the face of the land, washing off the dirt that had lingered for long until the messenger despaired of ever being able to remove it, the Mighty and Compassionate hand was extended to that messenger ensuring his safety and giving him the honour he deserved: "*We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected.* (Verses 13–14) It is clear in the phraseology of these verses that it is intended to impart an air of grandeur to the vessel, which is described as having planks and nails. It is only described, rather than named, to add to its importance. It floats under God's own eyes and care. This is all "*a reward for him who had been rejected*", and threatened. It is a reward that replaces people's rejection by divine care and ridicule by honour. It describes the great power at the disposal of one who is defeated after having done his best. This is what is available to those who exert their maximum efforts in advocating His cause, and also then put the matter to Him praying for His help. All powers in the universe are mobilized to support such people, and all, with God's permission and under His guidance.

This scene of truth's complete victory and the total eradication of advocates of unbelief is followed by an address to those who look at it as if it were happening before their very eyes: "*We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 15) This great event, with its well-known circumstances and results, is left as a sign and a reminder for future generations. Will any take heed? Then another gesture is added to awaken people's hearts telling them that the warnings given to them are all correct and the punishment that might be inflicted is severe indeed: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 16)

It all took place as the Qur'ān describes. The Qur'ān remains present, available to all, easy to understand, attractive by its sincerity and straightforwardness, consistent with nature, full of wonders and always retaining its power. Never is it weakened by familiarity. But rather

whenever it is contemplated, it gives more of its treasures. The more it is read, the better we are comforted by it: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 17)

This last verse provides the comment that occurs after each scene. The *sūrah* uses it by way of a pause inviting hearts to reflect after they have been shown one of the calamities that befell earlier deniers of the truth.

The ʿĀd and the Stormwind

> *The people of ʿĀd also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 18–22)

This is the second scene of powerful punishment that befell a whole community of unbelievers. It begins by reporting that the ʿĀd rejected the truth, but before any details are given, the *sūrah* adds the question intended to magnify the severity of the punishment meted out: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 18) The answer is immediately given by the *sūrah*: "*We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks.*" (Verses 19–20) The Arabic description of the wind, *ṣarṣar*, gives by its very sound a feeling of that wind which carries unceasing misfortune. Probably no misfortune could be worse than that which happened to the ʿĀd. The wind lifted the people and smashed them, leaving them like uprooted palm trunks.

The scene is violent and fearful; the stormwind sent against the ʿĀd was one of God's forces. It is a natural phenomenon God has placed in the universe. It operates according to the universal system He has chosen. He sends it against whomever He wishes. It continues to operate within natural laws, where there is no conflict between its normal operation in the planned order of things and its fulfilment of God's orders whatever they happen to be. It is He who set this natural law and issued the

command. "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 21) This statement is now repeated after the scene has been shown providing the answer. The episode concludes with the other comment repeated throughout the *sūrah* according to its own flow: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 22)

Aggressors Against God's Sign

> *The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. They called their friend, who took something and slew her. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 23–32)

The Thamūd was the tribe that succeeded the ʿĀd as the major power in Arabia. The ʿĀd lived in the south, while the Thamūd were based in the north of the Peninsula. Despite the fact that the ʿĀd's fate was well documented in the whole of Arabia, the Thamūd took no heed and rejected God's warnings just like the ʿĀd before them.

"*They said: Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verses 24–25) This reiterates the same old argument that troubled unbelievers one generation after another. Could this man have been chosen from among us all to receive a divine message? Again, their attitude smacks of a hollow arrogance that does not consider the message itself, but rather looks at the person advocating it: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves?*" (Verse 24)

Yet, why should it seem strange that God, who knows best to whom to entrust His message, should choose one particular person and give him revelations embodying reminders and directives? Why should it trouble them that God makes a choice when it is He, the Creator of all, who knows the one whose abilities and qualities make him the right choice. After all, it is God who gives the message. Their argument is baseless, and can only be entertained by deviant minds that do not look at the message itself to realize how true it is. They only look at the man advocating it, feeling too proud to follow one of their own number. They do not want to grant him position and status. Hence they say: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24)

The most peculiar thing is that they describe themselves to be in error if they were to follow divine guidance, and to be lost in folly if they accept faith. Hence, they point their fingers at the messenger God has chosen to lead them along the way of truth, accusing him of lying and of being greedy: "*No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verse 25) The accusation of lying means that he did not receive a message from God, and the accusation of insolence means that he was after a position of honour for himself. The same accusations have been levelled at all advocates of divine faith. They are often accused of using the divine message as a cover to seek position and personal interest. Such false accusations are the product of twisted minds that cannot discern what motivates people.

As the *sūrah* reports the story in narrative form, it suddenly changes course and continues as though it is happening at this very instance. It now speaks about what is going to happen, stating it in the form of a threat: "*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) This is one of the tools employed in Qur'ānic narratives to give an air of actuality, transforming them from a mere tale to events taking place before spectators who are full of anticipation about their development.

"*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) They will see the truth for themselves. They will not be immune to the consequences of this truth which heralds destruction for insolent liars: "*We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient.*

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn." (Verses 27–28) We stand watching with expectation to see what will happen when God sends them the she-camel as a test to prove their reality. Their messenger is also looking with expectation, carrying out the divine order that he should wait patiently until the test is completed. He has to deliver the instructions: the water the tribe has is to be shared equally, assigning one share to all the cattle and one to this she-camel alone. This must have been a she-camel with very special qualities, making her a miraculous sign. She takes the water one day, but does not disturb the other cattle on their day. She alternates with them in fairness.

The *sūrah* then reverts to the narrative style, reporting what happened afterwards: "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) This friend belonged to a group of evildoers in their city. The group itself is described in the Qur'ān thus: "*There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good.*" (27: 48) This one in particular is given an even apter description: "*their most hapless wretch.*" (91: 12) It is reported that this man got himself so drunk that he did not hesitate to undertake the miserable deed of killing the she-camel God had sent them as a sign. Their messenger had warned them against harming her, as this would render them liable to God's punishment. "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) Thus the test ended and the punishment was incurred: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 30) It is a question meant to emphasize the seriousness of what happened before mentioning the punishment inflicted when the warnings were not heeded.

"*We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder.*" (Verse 31) The Qur'ān does not give us any details here about this blast. However, it is described in *Sūrah* 41 as a thunderbolt: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*" (41: 13) The thunderbolt may only be a description of the blast making it a 'thunderbolt blast', or it may be a true description of its nature making the blast and the thunderbolt one and the same thing. Alternatively, the blast may be the sound produced by the thunderbolt, or the thunderbolt may merely

be an effect of the blast about which we know very little. Be that as it may, one blast was sent against those people, causing great havoc and leaving them like the *dry twigs* of one who needs such material to build a sheepfold, or used by a farmer as food for his cattle kept in a sheepfold. That blast reduced the people of Thamūd to a state of *dry twigs*. It is a fearful image raised against their earlier arrogance. All that remains of them is utter humiliation.

Now the *sūrah* draws its addressees' attention to the Qur'ān so that they may reflect. The Qur'ān provides an easy reminder: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 32) The curtains are drawn, leaving a glimpse of dry twigs that irritate one's eyes and shudder one's mind, while the Qur'ān steadfastly calls upon people to reflect and take heed.

Lot's People

When the curtains are raised again, we have another episode taking place close to Arabia:

> *Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 33–40)

The story of Lot's people is given in detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Its mention here is not intended to provide details, but rather to draw a lesson from what happens when people deny the truth and to remind them of the severe punishment that they may suffer. Hence, it starts with reporting their rejection of God's warning, followed by mentioning the punishment they suffered in consequence: "*Lot's people also rejected*

[My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful." (Verses 33–35) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān their punishment is described in the form of "*stones of clay*," (51: 33) Here, the description adds that it was a wind that bears the sound of hurling stones. This description fits well with the fierce atmosphere that characterizes the whole *sūrah*. Only Lot's family, except his wife, were saved in an act of God's grace and as a reward for their faith in and gratitude to Him: "*Thus do We reward the thankful.*" They are to be blessed even in the midst of a great calamity.

The story is thus told from both ends: the unbelievers' initial rejection of the truth and their ultimate punishment. Then the *sūrah* provides us with some further details. Again, this is one of the methods the Qur'ān uses in its narratives to emphasize certain ideas.

The details given here are: "*He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verses 36–38) Lot took much pain in warning his people against the perverted indecency they used to practise, but they doubted all his warnings, circulating their doubts among themselves. They argued with him, disputing what he said. Their reckless audacity went beyond limits, to the extent that they even tried to persuade him to hand over his angel guests. They thought them to be handsome young men, and their dirty and perverted lust was uncontrollable. They shamelessly wanted to assault his guests. They cared little for the sanctity of their prophet's home, despite his repeated warnings against their perverted practices.

At this point, God's mighty hand took action. The angels began to do what they were assigned to do: "*So We sealed their eyes.*" The unbelievers could no longer see anything or anyone. They could not persuade Lot or catch his guests. The reference to sealing their eyes occurs so clearly only in this instance. In another *sūrah* the angels say to Lot: "*We are messengers from your Lord. They shall not touch you.*" (11: 81) Here, what made the unbelievers unable to do what they wanted is specified as sealing their eyes.

As the *sūrah* tells its narrative, it suddenly shows the event as if it is happening now. The address is made to those who deserve punishment: "*Taste, then, My punishment and the fulfilment of [My] warnings.*" You have been warned against incurring this punishment, but you disputed those very warnings.

The sealing of their eyes took place in the evening, but it was in the morning that God determined to inflict punishment on them all: "*At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verse 38) This refers to the punishment already mentioned, which was the stone-bearing wind that purged the earth of their perversions.

Once more the mode of address changes so that we see the event as if it is taking place now. The punished are addressed as they suffer: "*Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.*" (Verse 39) This is followed by the familiar comment mentioned after the scene of turmoil: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 40)

These historical accounts are concluded with a brief reference to the fate of a famous community of unbelievers, outside Arabia: "*Pharaoh's people also received warnings. They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task.*" (Verses 41–42) Thus the whole story of Pharaoh and his entourage is summed up by mentioning its beginning and end: their receiving warnings, their rejection of all the signs and miracles that the messenger sent to them showed them, and their subsequent punishment by the Almighty. The reference here to God's might and ability to carry out His will indicate that their end was violent and calamitous. It implies an allusion to the hollowness of Pharaoh's power and his ability to inflict injustice. All his might is shown to be worthless. He could avail himself of nothing. God inflicted such a punishment on him and his host that can only be carried out by the Almighty. This is most fitting because of the injustice and tyranny they practised for so long.

A New and Powerful Warning

Now that the curtains have fallen after all these scenes of punishment and suffering, the *sūrah* addresses those who rejected the final message.

They have been reminded of the fates of those earlier peoples, and those images are still present in their minds. Now, they are given their own warning so that they avoid a similar fate. Indeed, they are warned against an even more terrible fate:

> *Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' We have created everything in due measure. Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.* (Verses 43–53)

It is a warning of punishment in this life and further suffering in the life to come. It removes any doubt about the veracity of this warning, sealing any loophole of hope to escape it, and any possibility of false accounting to evade it.

All those communities met their respective fates: what prevents a similar fate happening to you? "*Are your unbelievers better than those others?*" (Verse 43) What distinguishes you from earlier unbelievers? "*Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books?*" (Verse 43) Such immunity recorded in sacred books might have had some effect. However, neither situation applies: you are no better than them and you have no immunity. Therefore, the only fate awaiting you is one similar to theirs, in the form God determines.

The *sūrah* then makes a general address, wondering at their attitude, particularly when they inspect their forces and feel themselves very powerful. They claim that they cannot be defeated: "*Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'?*" (Verse 44) At this point, a clear and decisive statement is loudly echoed: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" (Verse 45) Neither large forces

nor powerful hosts will be of any avail. The One who announces this to them is none other than God Almighty. It came true at the time and it will always be true.

Al-Bukhārī reports on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that on the day of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet was standing under a canopy and praying: "Lord! I appeal to You to fulfil Your promise. Lord! If You so wish, You may not be worshipped on earth again." Abū Bakr held his hand and said: "Messenger of God! This is enough. You have appealed hard to your Lord." He came out rushing, and saying: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" In another report attributed to 'Ikrimah: "When this verse was revealed, 'Umar said: 'What host will be defeated and routed?' He later said: 'When on the day of the Battle of Badr I saw God's Messenger coming out and reading, "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee,*" I knew its fulfilment."

Such was the defeat in this present life, but it is neither the final nor the most crushing and bitter one. Therefore, the *sūrah* leaves it aside to speak about the one that is to follow: "*But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter.*" (Verse 46) It is far more bitter and terrible than any suffering they could ever experience in this life on earth. It is more calamitous than any scene of punishment drawn for their understanding: worse than the floods, the howling, cold wind, the blast, the stone-bearing wind and Pharaoh and his host's drowning.

Details are given to indicate how it is more calamitous and bitter. In this way, a powerful image of the Day of Judgement is drawn: "*The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verses 47–48) They are in an error that torments minds and souls, and in a raging fire that burns skin and bodies. This is because they and their like used to say in this world: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24) They will come to realize where error lies and what folly leads to. They will be dragged on their faces into the raging fire. Such humiliation contrasts with the pride they used to take in their might. Their suffering is increased even further by mental

pain, and all this is painted as though it were taking place now: "*Taste now the touch of hell-fire.*" (Verse 48)

Most Accurate Measure

The *sūrah* now makes a clear statement addressed to all mankind, but specifically to those Arabs, to drive home to them the fact that everything is subject to God's will, wisdom and planning. The punishment administered in this life and the one inflicted in the life to come, the messages and warnings given before them, the revelations given to God's messengers, and everything surrounding all this in terms of creation, events and planning are all subject to God's plan and will. All these and everything large or small are created in accordance with an accurate measure and are wisely planned. Nothing occurs haphazardly or by coincidence: "*We have created everything in due measure.*" (Verse 49) This applies to all creatures, silent or endowed with speech, moving or motionless, past and present, known or unknown: their creation is subject to an accurate measure. It is this measure that determines the nature, qualities, quantities, time and place of everything, as well as their links with others around them and the effect they produce.

This short Qur'ānic statement refers to a major and momentous truth that is confirmed by the universe. It is acknowledged by the mind as it looks at the world around it and responds to it. The human mind is bound to feel that the universe is finely coordinated. Everything in it is according to a measure that achieves absolute balance and coordination.

Observation, research and experience will understand this truth in as far as these methods can achieve and the human mind can fathom. Yet there remains beyond it what is greater and more perfect. Human nature appreciates the harmonious influence the universe leaves on it, since it is indeed part of this same coordinated and harmonious universe, in which everything is created in due measure.

Modern science has managed to reach some aspects of this truth, using what is available of tools and practises. It knows now the relative distances between planets and stars, their sizes and gravity to the extent that scientists are able to determine the positions of some planets before

they can actually see them. They make their assumptions on the basis that overall coordination requires that such planets be in the positions they have defined. Only the existence of such planets in their positions explains certain aspects of the movement of the planets they have monitored. Later on, their assumptions are proved true, which means that all celestial bodies are placed in space according to accurate relations that admit no error.

Scientists now realize that balance and coordination in the position of our planet earth are absolutely necessary to ensure the continuity of the type of life God has willed to place on it. They say that should this balance be disturbed in any aspect, all life on earth will be destroyed or would not have been possible in the first place. The size of the earth, its mass, distance from the sun, the mass of the sun, its temperature, the angle of its axis, its speed as it rotates and moves in orbit, the position of the moon in relation to the earth, its size and mass, the relation between sea and dry land on earth, and scores of other aspects and relations are all made according to an accurate measure. Should any of these be disturbed, everything would change resulting in the end of life on earth.

Our understanding of the balance and coordination between a large number of factors that are necessary to keep life on earth under control and establish the proper interrelations between living creatures and the conditions in which they live, and between different species of creatures, is such that we can now appreciate the profound truth the Qur'ānic verse refers to. The factors of life and survival on the one hand and those of death and extinction on the other in the environment and the nature of living creatures are always kept in such a fine balance as to ensure the continuity of life and its progress without allowing it to increase to the extent that there would not come a time when there is not enough of what is necessary for sustenance and survival.

We spoke at length on the harmony and balance in the universe and on earth in an earlier volume,[1] and it is fitting that we discuss here the balance in the interrelation between different species:

1. Volume XII, pp. 370–382.

Birds of prey are small in numbers because they lay few eggs. They also live in a special environment. On the other hand, they live longer than other birds. Had they been able to procreate at a higher rate and to live as long as they do in all environments, they would have ensured the extinction of smaller and more numerous birds or greatly reduced their numbers. These smaller birds are needed in such large numbers because they are part of the food chain and they fulfil an important role in the continuity of life on earth.

A fly lays millions of eggs, but its life span is two weeks. Had flies lived for a few years laying eggs at the same rate, the face of the earth would have been entirely covered with flies. Human life, as well as the life of many other species, would have become impossible. However, the balance established by the Almighty determines the relation between life span and the rate of procreation to ensure the continuity of life.

Among all living things, microbes are the largest in number and fastest in multiplication and devastation; but at the same time they have the weakest resistance and the shortest life span. They die in their millions as a result of many factors, such as cold, heat, light, acids, plasma, etc. They overpower only a limited number of animals and humans. Had they had stronger resistance or a longer life span, they would have destroyed life altogether.

Every living species is equipped with a weapon to protect itself against its natural enemies and to ensure its own survival. Such weapons vary from moving in numbers to ferocity of attack. In between there is a great variety of weapons and methods of self defence. Small snakes have their poison and move at speed to evade their enemies, while large ones rely on the strength of their muscles. Hence, the poisonous ones are fewer among large snakes. Beetles, which have little in the way of self defence, can discharge on whatever touches them a foul-smelling caustic substance to protect themselves. Deers can jump and run at a fast speed, while lions are extremely powerful. Such are all living creatures, large and small.

Likewise, man, animals, birds and all other creatures, including the lowest species, are equipped with the means to obtain their

food and to benefit by what they feed upon. The fertilized egg which clings to the uterus needs nourishment. It causes a tear in the wall of the uterus, making a pool of blood which it can feed upon, and thus it grows. An embryo feeds through the umbilical cord that links it to its mother. Had the cord been too long, the food would have become fermented before it reached the embryo, and had it been too short, the food would have gushed through it, and harmed the embryo.[2]

When birth takes place a white, slightly yellowish liquid is produced from the mother's breasts. One of the wonders of God's creation is that this liquid consists of dissolved chemicals to protect the newborn from illness. One day after the child's birth milk begins to flow. God's elaborate planning ensures that the quantity of the mother's milk is increased day after day, amounting to one and a half litres a day by the time the child is one year old, while it weighs only a few ounces in the early days. It is not merely the quantity of the milk that increases to satisfy the child's needs, but also its ingredients change in kind and concentration. In the early days it is more like water containing a small amount of carbohydrates, but as time goes on the concentration of sugar, carbohydrates and proteins increases day after day, to ensure the child's healthy growth.[3]

When we study the different systems in man's body, their functions, physiology and role in ensuring man's health and survival, we are amazed at the elaborate planning. We see God's hand taking care of every individual, and indeed every organ and cell. We cannot discuss here this world of wonders. Therefore, we will only refer to the fine tuning of endocrine glands:

> These are small chemical factories providing the body with the chemicals it needs. They are so powerful that a fraction of one billionth of them will seriously affect the body. They function in such an order that the secretion of each gland complements the secretion of another. All that we know about these secretions is that

2. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo (n.d.), pp. 46–47.
3. Ibid., pp. 47–48.

> they are surprisingly complex. Should their secretion be disturbed, this will cause general harm in the body, which could be very serious if it continues even for a short while.[4]

Animals have different systems according to their different natures, as well as the environments and circumstances in which they live.

> Lions, tigers, wolves, hyenas, and other predators that need to hunt and kill their prey, have sharp teeth and firm molars. They also have strong leg muscles, as well as sharp claws. Their stomachs secrete the necessary acids and enzymes to digest raw meat and bones.[5]

Ruminant animals that graze in meadows have been equipped with different tools:

> Their digestive systems have been designed in a way that suits their environments. Their mouths are relatively wide, without canine teeth or molars. Instead they have sharp front teeth that help them to eat grass and plants quickly, swallowing them in gulps so as to be able to provide their natural service for man. Divine care has given these animals a most peculiar digestive system. The food they eat goes first to the rumen, which serves as a storage place. When the animal has finished its day's work and sits for rest, the food it has eaten goes to another part called the reticulum, and then it is sent back to the mouth where it will now be chewed well before it is sent to a third compartment of the stomach called the omasum. The final stage is a fourth compartment called the abomasum. This very long process also serves to protect these animals which are often attacked in their grazing places by predators. Therefore, they often need to swallow their food fast and hide. Scientists say that this process of digestion is necessary, indeed vital. Grass is hard to digest because of the cellulose it contains, which means that the animal needs a long time for digesting its food. Had it not had a rumen to store the food, these animals would have had to spend

4. Ibid., pp. 51–52.
5. Ibid., pp. 71–72.

a long time, may be a whole day, in grazing without even giving them enough nourishment. The very process of cutting the grass and eating it would have been tiring to the animal. As it is, taking the food in gulps and storing it in the rumen where it is softened and fermented somewhat, then bringing it back to the mouth for further chewing, enables these animals to fulfil all functions: doing their work, eating and proper digestion. All glory belongs to God who created everything in an elaborate design.[6]

Birds of prey such as the owl and the kite are given sharp, curved, hook-like beaks to be able to tear flesh. Geese and ducks are, by contrast, given wide, flat and spoon-like beaks suitable for catching food in mud and water. They even have on both sides of their beaks little lumps which serve as teeth to cut grass. Domestic fowls and pigeons which pick up seeds from the ground have short and pointed beaks. The swan has a conspicuously long beak at the bottom of which there is a sack that serves like a fisherman's net because swans feed mainly on fish. The hoopoe has a long and pointed beak that serves to look for insects and worms that are often below the surface of the ground. Scientists often say that a glance at a bird's beak is enough to tell us what it feeds on. The rest of the digestive system of birds is wonderfully peculiar. Since birds do not have teeth, they are given a crop and a gizzard for digestion. Birds also pick some hard objects and stones to help the gizzard in its digestive function.[7]

If we were to look at all the different species in the same way, it would take far too long in this exercise and would deviate from the method we have followed in this work. Therefore, we will now just look at the amoeba, the single-celled creature, to see how God has set its role in life and how He takes care of it.

The amoeba is a microscopic organism that lives in ponds or stagnant water, or on stones settled at the bottom of such waters. Its body is jellylike, changing shape as needed. When it moves, it

6. Ibid., pp. 72–73.
7. Ibid., pp. 73–74.

> pushes forwards parts of its body to use like feet. When it finds food, it picks it up with similar protrusions. It secretes a digestive fluid so as to digest what is useful to it and ejects the remainder. It breathes with all its body, taking oxygen from water. Imagine this little creature which can never be seen with the naked eye performing all life functions, including taking nourishment, breathing, discharging unwanted stuff and moving around. When it has completed its growth, it divides into two, with each forming a separate amoeba...

The wonders of the plant world are no less amazing than those of human, animal and bird life. Elaborate planning is equally observed in plants: "*It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions.*"[8] (25: 2)

A Far Greater Perspective

Yet the question of elaborate planning is far greater than this. Indeed everything that takes place in the universe: all events in all directions, large and small, take place according to a plan and in a set measure. This applies to every occurrence in history, every feeling experienced by every individual, every breath, etc. Each breath takes place in due measure with regard to time, place and other factors and circumstances. It is related to the universal system and taken into account in the overall universal balance, just like major events. A wild, little plant that sends out its shoot in the open desert is placed there according to an accurate measure. It fulfils a function that is related to the existence of the universe. The same applies to a single ant moving to its destination, a particle in the air, an organism floating on water, just as it applies to the huge celestial bodies in this vast universe. All are there in due measure with regard to time, place, quantity, shape and form, maintaining due balance in all situations.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Jacob's marriage to a second wife who gave him his two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, was not

8. Ibid., pp. 101–102.

a personal affair, but rather an intended event serving an overall plan? It was planned that Joseph's half brothers should feel very jealous of him, take him and throw him in the well, after they had thought of killing him, so that a travelling caravan would pick him up and sell him in Egypt where he would find a home in the palace of the Chief Minister. There, he would then be subjected to the Minister's wife's advances, but he resisted all temptation and as a result was thrown into prison. Why? There he would meet two of Pharaoh's servants and interpret their dreams. Why? Until that moment, there is absolutely no answer. People wonder why Joseph should go through all this suffering? Why should his father, who is a prophet, suffer until he loses his eyesight? The first answer comes after a quarter of a century of suffering. Divine will has been preparing him to supervise the affairs of Egypt, its people and the populations of the surrounding areas during seven years of drought. And then what? He brings his parents and brothers to Egypt where their offspring constitute the Children of Israel who were later persecuted by Pharaoh. Then Moses is born and his life is also carefully planned. Beyond that, various issues, events and trends arise, having a bearing on human life throughout the world until today.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Abraham's marriage to Hagar, the Egyptian woman, was not a personal affair, but rather, along with the events preceding it in Abraham's life, part of a careful plan. It involved all the events leading to his forsaking his home town in Iraq, going to Egypt where he married Hagar and she gave him his first son, Ishmael. Then he took Ishmael and his mother, leaving them in the neighbourhood of the yet to be built Sacred Mosque in Makkah. Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), would then be born out of Abraham's seed in Arabia, the most suitable place on earth for the Islamic message. This series of events then culminated in the most important one in the history of mankind.

God's will remains behind the far end of every thread, every event: birth, point, step, change and ultimate result. All occur in accordance with His will which is profound, all comprehensive and inevitable. People sometimes see only the near end of the thread, but not its far end. There could be an extended, long span of time between the beginning and end in their own lives, which makes them unable to see the wisdom

behind what takes place. They will then try to hasten things, and may also offer suggestions. They may even go beyond this, demonstrating anger and impudence. God teaches them in the Qur'ān that everything occurs in due measure and appropriate proportion. Therefore, they should leave things to the One who controls all. This will give them comfort and reassurance, and they will then be sure of the balance and coordination brought about by God's will.

Operating the Divine Will

Along with the elaborate planning and the assigning of due measures goes God's power, which accomplishes the greatest of events by the simplest means: "*Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye.*" (Verse 50) It takes just a signal or one word and everything, great or tiny, is done. In fact there is nothing to distinguish great from tiny; it is all part of how human beings see things. Nor is there a question of time, not even the twinkling of an eye; it is merely a metaphor to help people understand. Time is no more than a human conception that arises from the position of the earth and its rotation. As far as God and His plans are concerned, it has no significance.

The command is given just once and this entire universe comes into existence. Similarly, any change in it can be accomplished. Just one command and it will all go away as God wishes. In everything, the command is given once only: bringing anyone into life, taking it here or there, causing it to die, bringing it back in some shape or form, resurrecting all creatures from all generations to gather them for the reckoning and reward. It is a once only command that requires no effort or time, because it comes from the Almighty in due measure and with perfect ease.

It was always a once-only command to bring about the terrible fate of communities that rejected the truth of God's message. The *sūrah* reminds its addressees of the fates suffered by communities who, like them, rejected the truth: "*We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.*" (Verses 51–53) Those fates are mentioned in the *sūrah*, but people need to take heed and think of the likely outcome

of the position they take towards God's message. Yet the story is not over for those communities that suffered such calamities; they have to face further reckoning that takes account of every little thing: "*Everything they do is noted in their records,*" which will be submitted on the Day of Reckoning. "*Every single thing, small or great, is recorded,*" so that nothing is forgotten.

Now the *sūrah* shows a different image of trust and safety. It is the destiny enjoyed by the righteous: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) They enjoy all this while the evildoers are in error, in raging flames where they are dragged with their faces down and rebuked.

This image describes the bliss which the God-fearing enjoy in its two components, the physical and the spiritual. The physical aspect, granted for the senses, is summed up in an all-embracing phrase, '*in gardens and running waters*'. The very sound of these words adds connotations of ease, comfort and enjoyment. The spiritual component touches the heart and mind; it is the bliss of being close to God: "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" It is a steady, firm seat, giving pleasure and reassurance because it is close to where all eyes are focused. This is all because these righteous people fear God and are apprehensive of what may become of them. God will not allow double fear to overwhelm anyone: fearing Him in this present life and fear in the life to come. Whoever truly fears Him in this world will be safe and reassured in the next. As good believers enjoy security at the time and place of greatest fear, they are granted a pleasant environment and honour.

With this soft rhythm and pleasant outcome, the *sūrah* that portrayed a series of distressing and fearful images comes to an end. This gives its conclusion a more profound effect. It is a perfect way of educating by the One who knows how to influence hearts and souls. This is yet another aspect of operating the accurate measure by the One who has created everything in due measure. All glory to the One who knows all.